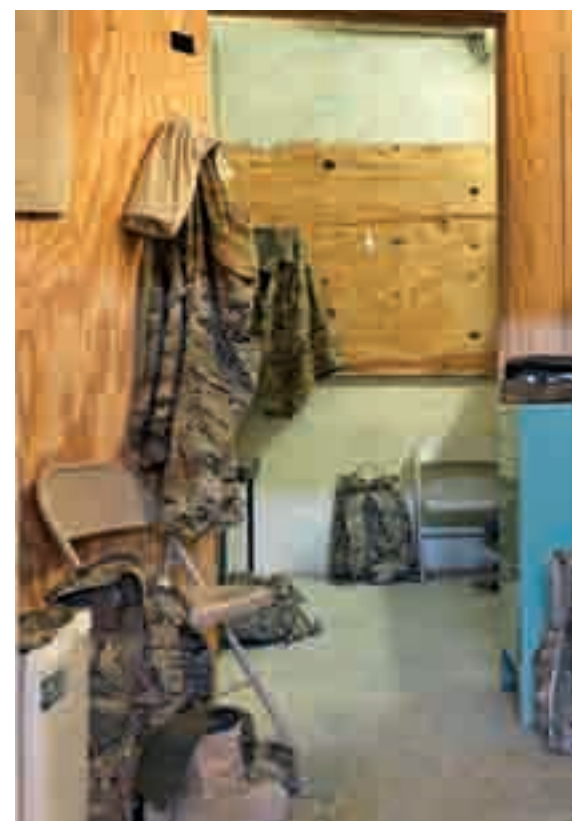




THE VIEW FROM BASE

Bagram Airfield is the US military's largest enclave in Afghanistan, and yet few of the 40,000 people who work there ever see anything more of the country they occupy than the mountain-top view above the base's heavily fortified walls. Edmund Clark tells Diane Smyth why he made this the subject of his work

Our impression of war is shaped by images of soldiers on patrol or in combat, says photographer Edmund Clark; but in actual fact, most of the 40,000 people stationed at Bagram Airfield - America's largest enclave in Afghanistan - never leave it. Protected but also confined by perimeter walls that are secured by patrols, they live in mess halls, meeting rooms, sleeping quarters, a supermarket and a gym. Their experience of Afghanistan is restricted to the landscape they can see over the walls, images





of the country on murals in the meeting rooms and paintings in the dining facility, a weekly bazaar and 7000 security-screened local workers who provide cooking and cleaning services.

Some of the personnel may also meet locals in the Parwan Detention Facility, the on-site jail whose treatment of prisoners has attracted Amnesty International's attention. Insurgents based in the mountains also sporadically take potshots at the camp, launching rudimentary missiles that may or may not go off.

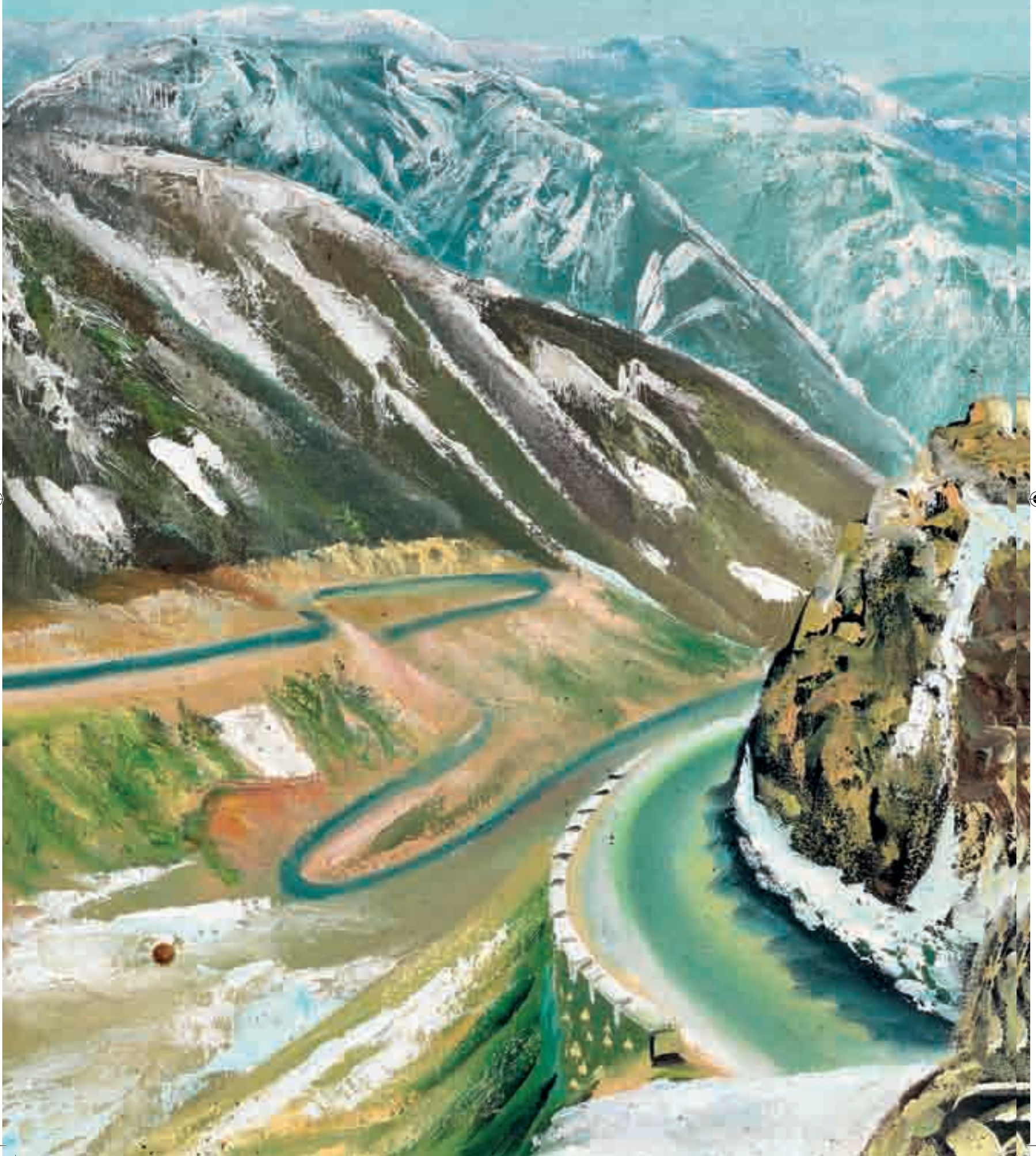
Clark has previously shot the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base and a British control order house, and gained access to Bagram by being embedded with the US military and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). But despite this, he was not allowed to photograph the detention facility. Nor did he particularly want to; he was interested in looking at the base through its physical or structural presence, in particular its infrastructure - food, water and power - and through the quotidian

places most of the troops never leave. "I am looking at Bagram as a Western and particularly American experience," he says. "We have seen a lot from Afghanistan showing military engagements with the Taliban, or armoured vehicles dealing with improvised explosive devices, but very little showing the experience of most of the people who have served there, most of whom are non-combatants."

Clark was fascinated by the technological feat of running such a huge facility. Originally



Salang







built in the 1950s, and a Soviet airbase from 1979 to 1989, Bagram has swelled to become a 15km² facility since 2001 and the start of Operation Enduring Freedom. It is now the busiest military airfield in the world, hosting aircraft and drones with evocative names such as Liberty, Predator and Reaper, and underpinned with power and water plants, a state-of-the-art sewage treatment centre and recycling facilities. "This is an occidental

enclave showing all the sophistication of the world's most advanced military superpower," says Clark. "And yet after 13 years of war, the Taliban and other groups are still there, waiting for the duration with inferior weapons, hidden in the environment - their biggest ally. This tactic, and the imbalance of technology, is typical of conflicts of resistance. They will still be there when the forces leave [President Obama announced in May that the role of ISAF would

pass from combat to support and training at the end of 2014, leaving just over 10,000 troops for perhaps two years]."

For Clark, the mountains around Bagram's concrete perimeter fence suggest the gulf in technology, understanding and experience between the Western bases of Operation Enduring Freedom and the country they occupy; his photographs were taken with a state-of-the-art digital Hasselblad in a deliberate echo





of Western technological prowess. “The way I have taken the images is as much a part of the process as the images themselves,” he says. He will publish the work in a portfolio-style book with Here Press, which will include photographs of the mountains around the base and reproductions of paintings of Afghan mountainscapes by an artist called Majeed [previous page], which Clark found on the walls of one of the Bagram dining facilities.

“There is distance between the mountains,” he writes, in a text that will appear in the book. “Vistas of tranquillity fabricated by hand from canvas, wood and paint. Images from an enclave captured in high resolution by the latest digital technology. And there is common ground. Both are simulacra of enduring freedom, and in both the mountains belong to Majeed.” *BJP*
www.edmundclark.com

Previous page, and images at the top of spreads, are from the series *The Mountains of Majeed*, which will be published as a book by Here Press.

Images at the bottom half of spreads are from the series *Bagram Airfield*.
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